

FACES OF THE REFORMATION

THOMAS MÜNTZER

Born: circa 1485 | Stolberg, Germany
Died: May 27, 1525 | Camp Görmär (near Eisenach), Germany



REFORMATION
2017 It's *Still* All About
Jesus

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Twisting the Reformation into a violent rebellion

THOMAS MÜNTZER WAS CONVINCED THAT AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY WAS POSSIBLE ONLY THROUGH THE CHARISMATIC ACTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT UPON THE HUMAN HEART. All other doctrine was secondary to this experience of the Spirit. He further argued that any theology that did not emphasize this view on every point should be rejected. This radical position led him to oppose the other reformers and even to inspire a violent revolt.

Müntzer was a priest who spent a brief time with Luther in Wittenberg. While there, he accepted many Reformation ideas. He then served in Zwickau, Prague and Allstedt. He used his influence as the local priest to inspire radical social reforms. In these reforms he separated himself from Luther's theology because he felt Luther did not go far enough.

In addition to studying with Luther, Müntzer was influenced by the German mystics, who focused the Christian life on the imitation of Christ's suffering and dying. He coupled this idea of imitation with Luther's early writings that stressed the internal turmoil (*Anfechtung*) of the individual in the process of justification. Müntzer argued that this internal turmoil was the prerequisite to meeting the Holy Spirit "in the pit of the soul" (*Seelenabgrund*). This meeting was the only way one could receive true faith and thereby be a true Christian. Müntzer, therefore, based his faith upon the Spirit alone, independent of outside influences — like Scripture, Baptism or doctrine.

This focus on the Spirit divided Christians. Müntzer argued that only those who received the Spirit in their hearts were the elect and in true communion with God. These true Christians were more likely to be laity than clergy, since he opposed treating clergy as the mouthpieces or instruments of God in any way. He argued that the reformers who valued church offices were proclaiming a simulated faith that was a hindrance to people's actual salvation. He thought every Christian must tear down this simulated faith before one could discover the authentic faith in the Spirit.

Müntzer's focus on the Spirit led him to radical conclusions. He thought the role of the elect was to purge evil from the world in order to hasten the second coming of Christ. He expected that many would resist these reforms and that this new order needed to be instituted forcibly. To accomplish this task, he asked that the governing authorities be guided by the Spirit and set up a Christian theocracy to transform the world through force. Since the current governors were not doing this, Müntzer established the "league of the elect" to change the world through illegal and violent means. This league led a violent revolt against the current society and attempted to unseat ecclesiastical and government offices. In 1525 Müntzer was caught, tried and beheaded for his role in the revolt.

Müntzer exemplifies the danger of taking one element of theology, isolating it from its context, and twisting it to meet one's own needs.

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